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INTARSIA.

(From a paper by Stephen Webb, read before the Society of Arts, and printed in the *Journal of that Society*.)

INTARSIA, or inlays of wood, ivory, etc., one of the most interesting of the so-called "minor" arts, has probably suffered more both from its neglect and from its abuse than any other method of decoration. At its best—kept within its proper limitations—no more delightful form of decoration was ever devised. One must, however, be confronted with a bad example in order to be able to realize how bad it can become at its worst.

Probably every existing form of art or craftsmanship has at some period of its development suffered through the ultra-cleverness of its exponents. In painting at the present time technique (especially in France) is worshipped for its own sake, and what we think should be only regarded as a means of expression is set before the student as the end to be attained. Intarsia, like every other art, is at its best when most itself, but, except in the earliest periods of its development, its students and makers were never able to resist the temptation to wander out of their proper limits in imitation of other arts.

To a designer who has taken the thing up in the right spirit, and who has gone to the trouble of making himself even tolerably well acquainted with the resources of the craft, it would appear incredible that anyone should consider it necessary to go outside its proper limitations in order to imitate any of the sister arts. The materials are so beautiful in themselves, so infinitely varied, and so adaptable to his purpose, that, assuming him to possess even a small measure of artistic instinct, his work is really half done to his hand before he draws or cuts a line. The decorative problems which present themselves to the worker in intarsia for solution are few as compared with those of the painter or sculptor. For example, he has not to concern himself with surface technique at all. Tone, harmony, and, in a limited degree, the sense of values, he must certainly cultivate. He must also be able to draw a line or combination of lines which may be ingenious if you like, but *must* be delicate and graceful, vigorous withal, and in proper relation to any masses which he may introduce into his design.

He must thoroughly understand the value of contrast in line and surface form, but these matters, though a stumbling-block to the amateur, are the opportunities of the competent designer and craftsman—if by good hap the designer is in a position to be the craftsman also. The most charming possibilities of broken color lie ready to his hand to be merely selected by him, and introduced into his design; and yet, with these and other advantages peculiar to work in this kind, the whole history of the art, so far as we can follow it, except in the earliest times, is a story of perverted ingenuity, the story of an art degraded more than any other by the perverseness and want of taste of its votaries.

I do not know the precise date at which the use of veneer for furniture became general, but I have little doubt that what may be termed the "fatal facility" which this afforded to the craftsman must have suggested the over-elaboration which had been practically impossible through the limitations imposed by the earlier methods. The earliest examples of inlaid work, viz., those in which the ground is cut away and the pattern inserted into the solid wood, will nearly always be found to be good of their kind. The work, from its nature, could only be done at the cost of much time and labor, and this, doubtless, suggested to the executant the necessity for the elimination of everything from the design which was not absolutely necessary to the development of the motive—a condition of things which always makes for good decorative art in any material.

I doubt not that the early workers in intarsia often wrought, as the old bookbinders are said to have sometimes builded, "better than they knew."

With the introduction of veneers or skins of wood came a complete change. The economical necessity for the reticence hitherto observed was removed, the smallest details could be introduced into a design with comparatively little difficulty or cost. Wooden pictures began to replace the former pure and appropriate decoration. All reserve was apparently thrown aside, and the *l'arsair* of the period revelled in the representation of temples, gardens, figures in extravagant costumes, with wooden bodies and sometimes ivory heads or faces; and so the triumph of craftsmanship and the decadence of design may be followed through their various developments.

The French work of the eighteenth century is every whit as extravagant as that of Germany. There is a small table in the Jones collection at the South Kensington Museum the top of which is decorated with "Boule work" (metal and ivory). In the plan of the decoration a band is used into which and on which are introduced figures in the costume of the period, curiously scalloped cloths, tassels, foliated

forms, pateræ, caryatides, monkeys, squirrels, swags of flowers, baskets of flowers, masks, birds (cranes), dogs, festoons formed of petals or husks, cornucopie, and probably a few other properties more or less material to the scheme. If this kind of thing was ever worth doing (a matter about which I am hardly prepared to speak here) an excuse for it would surely be found in this table, which, as a piece of craftsmanship, apart from its design, is certainly one of the finest existing examples of this kind of work.

Personally I never have been able to get up any enthusiasm for metal inlay for furniture. It is frequently very gorgeous, nearly always extravagant in design, seldom beautiful, and even if one has the fortune to get a beautiful design, it is generally difficult to bring it into harmony with any color-scheme which may have been adopted for the decoration of the room.

Moreover, it is not easy to cut, though that is perhaps more a matter of time than difficulty, and it is apt to leave the ground when laid, which is a much more serious matter.

These are only mechanical difficulties. The chief trouble, and one which I confess I never have overcome to my own satisfaction, is in the selection of wood of a color and texture which shall at the same time contrast agreeably with the metal surfaces and harmonize both with the metal pattern and the ordinary colors used in the decoration of a modern room.

In studying French—and indeed all other marquetry work of nearly every period—the superiority of the workmanship to the design is still constantly in evidence.

It is not until the close of the fourteenth or beginning of the fifteenth century that we find intarsia used for the decoration of large surfaces, nor, indeed, till then does it appear to have been taken seriously into the consideration of artists or its possibilities recognized. Then we hear that Brunelleschi and Paolo Uccello gave lessons in perspective and tarsia to architects and others, of which Masaccio, in his paintings, and Benedetto da Majano, in his inlaid works, availed themselves.

There are certainly to be found examples of the craft in the small ivory boxes, ornamented with inlay of various colored woods, manufactured chiefly at Venice in the fourteenth century.

According to Vasari, one of the greatest names in the art is that of Fra Giovanni da Verona, who, in place of the dark and light woods of two or three tints only, used by the Majani, gave artificial colors to his wood-inlay by means of waters, colored infusions, and penetrating oils. To obtain brilliant high lights he was accustomed to use delicate slips of willow.

The Legnaghi are mentioned as good artists in this manner, and the Dominican monk Fra Damiano da Bergamo is spoken of as the most celebrated of the sixteenth century followers of the art. The tarsia work of artificially colored woods which Sabba Castiglione eulogizes clearly originated in Italy and reached its ultimate development in France and Flanders.

Probably the inlay which in its character most nearly approaches that of the Italian Damiano is the modern French work, so much of which is sent over to England in and for the decoration of pianofortes, etc.

The joinings of the various kinds of wood used in a design should not only not be concealed but they should be dealt with as frankly as possible, while their utilization in the design contributes almost more than anything else towards giving the work its character as intarsia or marquetry. It is true that the arrangement of the various pieces of veneer in a manner which will make the work of the cutter practicable and easy and secure an artistic line for the joinings at the same time calls for the exercise of some ingenuity, but this, though irksome and troublesome at first, soon becomes a habit with the designer for intarsia, or at least soon would do so if he understood its value. In nearly every example of modern work in which shading (generally produced by hot sand) has been resorted to, it has been abused. If the wood be properly selected, shading is rarely necessary, and if it is done at all, it should be done by an artist. In the hands of an artist, very beautiful effects may be obtained by this process, the same kind of wood being made to yield quite a number of varying shades of color of a low but rich tone, and that without any sacrifice of what, for lack of a better term, I must call the transparent quality, so characteristic of all good marquetry work. Over-staining and the abuse of shading is destructive of this, one of the most valuable and distinctive qualities in inlays of wood.

Ivory has always been a favorite material with workers in tarsia, and in the hands of an experienced designer very charming things may be done with it. There is, however, no material suitable for tarsia which requires so much care and experience in its use. It is ineffective in light-colored woods, and in the darker ordinary woods, such as ebony, stained mahogany or rosewood, under polish, the contrast of color is so great that the ivory must be used very sparingly. This kind of work is improved very much by age (the effect of light chiefly), even under polish. The ivory is sometimes stained in order to bring its color more into harmony with a dark-wood

ground, but it is never quite satisfactory, and no one who had seen much old ivory in tarsia could be deceived by it.

There are conditions possible where, particularly in the decoration of furniture, the advantages are nearly all on the side of intarsia, as compared with carving or modelling. The amount of time wasted, for instance, on very small carvings in dark-colored woods intended to be used in furniture is incredible. The color of wood, such as mahogany, walnut, etc., makes it impossible to see small carved detail in the various and varying conditions of light which usually obtain in a living-room, and when, as so frequently happens, rosewood or some other strongly marked wood is used for this purpose the markings in the wood are so much stronger than the shadows by which the small carved forms are expressed that their effect is destroyed, and the result must always be confusion and waste of time.

It is here that inlay for the surface decorations can be made so useful in the solution of a difficult problem, when it is done with judgment and taste, although I do not wish it to be for a moment supposed that I think marquetry can ever supersede carving for general purposes, even if the thing were desirable. This is merely a protest against the grievous waste of time and of skillful, and frequently artistic, labor; the decoration on small pilasters and capitals as applied to furniture and carved in these woods is rarely seen at all, except on a rough and disturbed surface. Still more rarely can enough of the motive or details be made out to awaken any interest in it.

Apart from the question of cost, which is always in favor of tarsia, there is this essential difference between the two methods, that, while carving must always depend in a large measure on the direction of the light for its effect as carving (you can destroy the effect of carving which is in low-relief at any time by a direct front light), the use of inlay makes the direction from which the light enters the room a matter of no moment, so long as the light reaches the object decorated.

ARCHITECTURE AND SCULPTURE.

INVOLUNTARILY our thoughts turn to consideration of the manner in which, in the past, the different arts, architecture and sculpture, were united. For, just as little as science can guide the genius of an artist, just so much would it be perverted by trying to divide, by a partition wall, the two aims of human mental activity, the contemplative investigating and the active creative. All performances of true art have a common aim: to express the mental by the physical, the unseen by the seen. How true this is of the art of building we all know from our own perceptions; for if we wished to impress some one in the most powerful manner with the contrast between the

antique and the art of the Middle Ages, we could do nothing better than conduct him from the arch of a dome to the pillars of the Parthenon. Nevertheless there are only general ideas here expressed, certain keynotes of the spiritual life. The entire building stands before us, organized and built by mathematical rules. In order to give the stiff form warmth and variety and to unite with the dominant idea in a harmonious manner that which the confidential feeling; claims, certain sculptured forms were employed, which were grounded in religious belief or in popular poetry. Thus individual portions of the building were distinguished; the uniformity was broken, empty space filled, fancy and emotion excited.

That this progressed with a certain urgency through all the centuries in which we know building and picture-making people, we are shown by a glance into the widely differing periods of culture, the oriental antiquity and the Christian Middle Ages. Double rows of holy animals lead from the Nile to the Egyptian temples. Their doors and walls are covered with reliefs, the images of praying kings impress us with the sanctity of the place. In the Assyrian palaces every room was filled with historical monuments celebrating the deeds of the builder.

In the Christian Church there was a tendency toward ornamenting the doors, which united the two arts in an excellent manner. First painters, then sculptors employed this space to voice the approaching religious sentiment. It was, as Violet le Duc expressed it, *la préface du monument*. In this statuary at the entrance to the temple one saw standing the guardian of the house of God, the Queen of Heaven, or one of the saints.

Only one nation, however, fully succeeded, through a series of experiments, which developed one step after another, in uniting architecture and sculpture in a perfect manner. These are the Greeks, and therefore the history of their temple sculpture has become an inexhaustible text-book of the relation between architecture and sculpture for all time.

As the temple became more stately, the gables broader and higher, the imaginative sense was incited to get out of the narrow circle of figures. Mythical creatures, half man, half animal, best filled the inconvenient corners, while in the middle of the angle images of the gods were erected. The placing together of the different figures led to dramatic grouping. Lively and expressive groups called for the powerful influence of light and shadow. The relief was given up, the statues were freed from the wall, so that, inclosed by the projecting edge of the roof of the temple, they stood out as if real. Next there appeared in the like sides of the triangle whole rows of sculptured motives. Next, the middle figure became the centre, with which all others were connected, either as the object of peaceful worship, or as the middle point of a strong contrast; then the similar: right and left wings were made use of, to place opposite each other, in an excellent manner, two parties, either in a prize contest, or in a bloody battle. Thus Athena divided the field of battle in the Temple of Egina, so Zeus the parties in the east gable of Olympia, both in solemn, erect attitude.



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